



JAMES LANGSTON MERCER HUGHES (1902-1967)

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin and raised in Lawrence until 1915-16. He was a true genius: he innovated the art of mixing spoken words with music, still an evolving American art form. He celebrated African American culture as he wrote poetry using the spoken vocabulary and sometimes in blues rhythms. He was a leader of the Harlem Renaissance in New York City, where he wrote plays, performed poetry, and mentored writers. He was a journalist, essayist, novelist, lyricist, and children's author.

When my husband and I researched Hughes's life in Lawrence for our book *Langston Hughes in Lawrence*, we found his homes were within walking distance of the Kaw River. He must have walked to its banks and watched the incessant flowing. The Kaw indeed is a "muddy" river that can be "golden" at dusk.

In this poem, Hughes calls on his memory of rivers as he catalogues, or lists, rivers important to world civilizations. He writes in uneven lines but maintains the poetic feel by using parallel beginnings and repetitions. He wrote of his poetry that it was often "racial in theme" and in "the rhythms of jazz." This poem could be an improvised solo.

THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Education: Langston Hughes graduated from high school in Cleveland, attended Columbia University, and earned a BA from Lincoln University, a historically Black university.

Career: Beginning with *The Weary Blues* (1926), Hughes made his living as a professional writer and lecturer. He published over 40 books and wrote numerous plays.

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